

Releasing your inner BLACKSMITH

Paul Melnychuk spends a fun-packed day at the Quirky Workshops in Cumbria to learn the art of blacksmithing with a handful of like-minded and aspiring hopefuls

THE LOVELY VILLAGE of Greystoke in Cumbria is famous for two things – it was the ancestral home of Tarzan, and is of course where Annie Swarbrick runs her Quirky Workshops from the Greystoke Cycle Café. The house is idyllic and the workshop facilities out back are no less pleasant, with a comfortable and spacious building for more genteel crafts such as painting, and a sheltered but open section to the side for more robust crafts such as blacksmithing, which I was there to learn about.

The course had been set to take place back in November, but Adrian Wood, the instructor, had fallen victim to the norovirus bug, and poor Annie had been unable to contact two of us with the bad news. To her credit, although he had only informed her at six o'clock on the morning of the course, she *had* tried to recruit a replacement at short notice, but had been unable to do so. A tip: if going on a course, give Annie your mobile number and check your emails the night before *and* again before setting off, just in case!

The day was frosty, but that didn't seem a problem, as the heat of blacksmithing would quickly remove the chill. Annie had wisely suggested dressing in layers so that you could peel off another one as things warmed up, and that made sense. Adrian was stoking the furnaces as I arrived, so



Left: The Greystoke Cycle Café, home of the Quirky Workshops.

I introduced myself, and a quick look round told me it was going to be fun, although I would most likely have to remain an editor rather than become the latest recruit to the once more fashionable world of blacksmithing.

Annie's courses wisely begin by bringing everyone together around a large table in a comfortable traditional kitchen over tea or coffee. The day will always go better after a little socialising, and everyone opened up about their reasons for wanting to do it. There were five chaps with backgrounds ranging from forestry to engineering to editing, and two women. Adrian joined us around the table and we learned a little about

the current state of play as regards blacksmithing in the modern world – it certainly seemed as yet untouched by Amazon, although Adrian *was* now online. I learnt that most blacksmiths today were working on the more decorative side of the sector, with only farriers permitted to shoe horses, and steel, which I had considered superior to iron, was in fact used as a cheaper but more readily available option. I also learnt that most farriers were badly in need of an osteopath by the time they reached their forties, due to the posture required when shoeing a horse.

We all wandered out to the burning coals, where Adrian gave us a rundown



Turning up the heat!



Creating a point.



Keeping the spiral flat.



Above: The group proudly displaying our achievements.

Left: Creating a spiral wine bottle holder.



of the principles of 'smithing' and the essentials of safety, such as not assuming that a quick dunking of steel in water might cool it sufficiently to grasp it, and that waving your work in progress around straight from the furnace and with others present could prove dangerous. He then proceeded to show us how to create a chestnut roaster from a simple steel rod using nothing but heat (lots of it!), a hammer and an anvil, with just a couple of further implements to add decoration. We all watched avidly as the artistry took place, feeling not a little like contestants on *The Generation Game* during the Bruce Forsyth era, in full knowledge that it would be our turn shortly.

In fact it looked reasonably

straightforward as Adrian did it, so we were all pretty confident, but as he seemed calm and approachable, we were safe in the knowledge that the questions we would all inevitably be asking would be answered with patience. My own chestnut roaster went very smoothly as I hammered out the rod around the horn (not a technical term, I'm sure) of the anvil to bend it into a spiral, before flattening it into something akin to a spoon shape, after which I would use a

hollowed out implement to hammer it flat. Each hammering required that the rod was immersed in the coals until it glowed a bright orange, but my spiral rapidly began to lose touch with the original plan, as it became a little anarchic, but a quick helping hand from the master eventually restored the parallel curves required, before I hammered it flat.

After this came the task of turning the opposite end into something resembling a leaf, which Adrian's prototype certainly did. This again looked simple, and the principle certainly was, but flattening the end of the rod after creating a point and then creating the familiar taper proved tricky, although most of us managed something pretty reasonable, which we then decorated by heating it once again before knocking in vein-like decorations to emphasise what it actually was supposed to be. From looking around we had all performed pretty well, but Adrian's supremacy was by no means under threat. ►



The apprentices at work.



Working on a leaf decoration.



Working on a roasting fork.



Returning for more heat.

► The next step in our education was to make a roasting fork, which we would create from a similar rod to the one we had just turned into varying approximations of a chestnut roaster. Again, Adrian demonstrated the technique, heating and hammering the rod flat, then splitting it so that we could create the two separate prongs of our forks – and therein lay the artistry of the challenge, as the horn of the anvil (still not a technical term) was used to fashion the stylish curves after using the square section at the top to separate the individual prongs. This would be a little more tricky than the spiral we had created for the chestnut roaster, and indeed it was, as mine went very well until I removed it from the heat to realise that one of the prongs (or the tip, at least) had disappeared in the intense heat. Adrian had a solution and cut the remaining prong down to the same length – the prongs would be a little shorter than originally intended, but the end result was certainly recognisable, and I even managed a stylish curve in the long handle, to my satisfaction.

The day was pleasantly split up by Annie's appearance at about eleven o'clock with tea, coffee and cupcakes, then again after midday, when we all enjoyed soup, rolls, dessert and banter around the large kitchen table, and again later in the afternoon with more tea, coffee and fresh scones with jam, when we took a break from our roasting forks. As yet no one had been burnt, skewered or hammered, either by themselves or by anyone else, so the day was going very well, with only one further challenge – the wine bottle holder.

This was an attractive spiral structure with a sharp point on one end for sticking it in the ground on those hot days when a chilled white wine close at hand is desirable. For these, we all hammered out spikes at both ends, one to go into the ground and the other



Fashioned in the flames of Mordor.

to form a delicate little twist at the end of the spiral into which the bottle would slip. By now a spike and a small twist were well within our abilities, as Adrian created the spiral using a bottle-sized cylinder around which he twisted the spiral in fluid movements.

At the end of the day we were given all three implements we had each made to take away to demonstrate our new skills.

Of course, blacksmithing is not learnt in a day, or indeed a decade. We had learnt *a little* about an age-old technique using heat to fashion metal, but what we had learnt about the principles of blacksmithing was *immense*, as we had begun to comprehend what lay behind the artistry that produced everything from wrought-iron gates to works of art. I recalled the voice of Darth Vader on my satnav, telling me, "You have reached your destination, but you are not a Jedi yet!" and realised I was also not a blacksmith either.

But what a day, connecting with a traditional skill, and what fun it was doing a course together with other like-minded people in a lovely, small, historic village in the Lake District.

Annie seems to have judged everything just about right with her appreciation of the balance between the skill we have all come to learn and the pleasure of interacting with everyone else present to turn the experience into an enjoyable and sociable experience. Is it competitive? Well, I would have loved to have created tools that would not have looked out of place in the V.&A, but my chestnut roaster would work best with larger chestnuts, as the hollow in the spiral was just a bit too large, and my roasting fork was considerably smaller than Adrian's prototype, but as we all stood for a final photograph waving our creations before us, they seemed pretty damn good. And regrets? Well, I wish I had taken my protective goggles off before the group photograph (like everyone else), but otherwise none. I'm now on the look out for my next fun-packed course. *



Further Info

Annie Swarbrick runs a huge range of courses from her 17th-century cottage and former farmhouse in Greystoke, ranging from spinning and silversmithing to blacksmithing, bee-keeping and bike maintenance. The welcome you receive is warm and the people you meet are pleasant – what other type of person would go on such courses! You can get an idea of the immense range of different subjects on her website at www.greystokecyclecafe.co.uk/workshops.htm#table, or you could just pop into the Greystoke Cycle Café tea garden for some Aga baking and mugs of tea as you pedal your way through the Lake District between Easter and September. If you arrive on your bike it's open to you every day from 10am to 6pm, and open to all others on Fridays from 12pm to 6pm, Saturdays from 10am to 6pm, and on the second Sunday of the month from 10am to 6pm. Quirky opening times indeed!

STOP PRESS!

I know it's the May issue of Home Farmer, but I also know it's in the shops from early April. Annie has a couple of places left on the blacksmithing course on Sunday 14th April – if you've read this you'll know they're great fun, so go for it! Visit www.awartistblacksmiths.co.uk to view some of Adrian's spectacular work around the country, both inside and out.